

Ryan Padraig Kelly

Being invisible is my superpower. I don't mean that I'm a superhero who is out slaughtering villains, cape flapping in the wind as I zoom over the New York skyline. The truth is, instead, that I am a "woman of a certain age" who has suddenly morphed into invisibility.

But don't worry, this isn't going to be a poor me story written by a middle-aged woman longing for her past. That would accomplish nothing. And I am a person who gets things done. I'm used to being the one that everyone turns to for answers, and the one who

pretended I wasn't aware of the power that my looks had as I coaxed people to do things for me. As you're reading this, I know that I probably sound like a narcissist, or perhaps just a bit shallow. I'm neither of those things, but I am a realist and am skilled at getting the results I need for any given situation.

I am the queen of manipulating, er, influencing people—it's one of the hazards of my job. I am responsible for keeping my department afloat financially, which has not come by easily or without learning to pressure people into making quick decisions that make them

uncomfortable. Not my problem, as regret accomplishes nothing.

You wouldn't know any of this about me, though, if you happened to notice me today, sitting in this nondescript coffee shop. I am here because it's across the street from the hospital where I work, so I can work in peace as I finish this grant proposal. And now that I have this power of invisibility, no one disturbs me while I work. Which is good, because I need to submit this proposal by tomorrow to secure our next round of funding. If approved, this grant would bring in millions of dollars and allow people to keep their jobs for the next year. So, it's

a big deal, and I thrive under pressure.

If you noticed me, though, you might assume I'm just someone's mom, getting out of the house because I'm lonely now that my kids have moved out. You might imagine that I have a husband who has lost interest in me, as you take note of my thickening waistline, hair speckled with gray and smile lines that only my husband thinks are charming.

Neither of those assumptions would be completely wrong. I do miss my kids: I might be a little lonely, but I'm not some bored

housewife. As far as my husband goes, I'm not sure how Dave feels about me these days. We're both so busy with our jobs that I don't think either one of us takes the time to notice the other. We get along fine; that's not a problem. It's just that I think I've become more of a comforting presence that Dave assumes (and he has no reason to think otherwise) that I will always be there. He had a chaotic childhood that involved a lot of moving, parents fighting over money and largely being left to fend for himself.

When Dave and I first met, I was still in my wild phase, so my chaos

felt familiar to him. As I got to know him, I grew to realize how much he craved stability, and I found myself wanting to be his steady rock. I surprised myself by falling madly in love and trusted him more than I had ever trusted anyone else. We started building a life together and before I realized it, I had settled down and felt I was exactly where I needed to be. Dave lovingly calls me his reformed “wild child”, thanking me for now providing the predictable stability that he has always wanted.

Admittedly, I have allowed my identity to become subsumed by my kids and my job. I used to take

off for Europe with just my backpack, go rock climbing without buying top of the line gear (like my husband would now make us do, for safety), drive two hundred miles in a day to see a concert, or take a job just because it sounded fun. I didn't care about money or stability; my m.o. was to not miss the party. Back then, my workmates were envious of my life, showing unabashed curiosity on Monday mornings as I regaled my latest weekend adventures.

Some of those weekend warrior activities were just part of youth. But that sense of awe I once had didn't have to fade into what I now

sadly realize is a dimming flicker. Over the years, I have let go of the things that used to make me feel alive, exhilarated.

Fast forward to now, I don't have any exciting weekend tales, unless you consider pumping our flooded basement wild. I could probably start yodeling in this coffee shop and people might glance over at me with bewilderment for a few seconds, but then promptly get back to their more interesting conversations. Nothing to see here.

And then it hits me. The fact that there is nothing to see here allows me great power to be a little more

adventurous again. When you're invisible, nobody judges you for making bad decisions or singing off key at karaoke night. I allow myself to imagine some of the wild things I might do if I was free to do whatever I wanted, without anyone watching. I shake my head, trying to bring my focus back to the task at hand. I promised myself I would finish this proposal before my Zumba class tonight, so I get back to work.

A few minutes later, I hear a scrape on the wooden floor as the woman sitting next to me pushes in her chair. She saves her spot by placing her book and sunglass case

on the table before heading to the front counter. Pulled from my reverie, I am aware of muted conversations around me, the sound of clinking glasses, silverware on plates. I feel like I'm on my own island as I sit in this crowded, bustling room. And then, a strange thought, completely out of nowhere: *What would happen if I reached over and took that woman's sunglass case...would anyone even notice?*

This was such a bizarre thought, as I am a minimalist and most definitely not in need of another sunglass case. Plus, I don't steal other people's things. But I feel an

unexpected charge as I dare myself to just reach over and take it. I could always pretend my napkin had somehow landed on her table if she suddenly came back, or if someone noticed. Before I could stop myself, I had my napkin in hand as I used it to cover the case and pick it up. Without even a sideways glance, I dropped the case into my open messenger bag and placed my napkin back in my lap. I slowly scanned the room and soon received confirmation that my cloak of invisibility was firmly in place.

My grant proposal was approved, and the next week was a celebratory one. My invisibility was briefly threatened by the accolades I received, and I nearly forgot about my coffee shop theft. I smiled as I remembered the woman returning to her seat, sunglasses atop her head as she resumed reading her book. She left a short while later, looking only mildly perplexed as she gathered her things. She even smiled absently at me as she stood up. I returned her smile, feeling secure that my invisibility test had worked.

The weeks following the grant approval allowed me to catch my breath at work. I found my mind wandering toward other ways I could use my invisibility to try to regain my taste for adventure. At last week's book club, I spontaneously put Yolanda's pepper mill in my purse when I went back to the kitchen for a wine refill. I fully intended to pull it out once she noticed it was missing so we could all share a laugh over my ridiculousness. But she never did, so it ended up in the junk drawer in my home office so I wouldn't have to explain this bizarre acquisition to Dave.

I was feeling strangely exhilarated while also considering the possibility that I might be having some sort of a crisis (please don't let it be of the midlife variety). I decided that it would only become a crisis if I let it and promised myself that I wouldn't do anything too crazy. I remained safe in my invisibility.

Another day, I tried on multiple outfits at Abercrombie and Fitch, making a show of coming out of the dressing room to look at myself in the big mirror, spinning in circles as I repeatedly offered my reflection chef kisses and exclaiming "Bravo!" Shouldn't the

fact that someone of my age was in A&F at all have gotten a little attention? Nope. The next day, I wore a hideously ugly shirt out to dinner with my usually highly observant husband to see if he would notice (he did not). I wasn't sure whether I should be thrilled with what I was pulling off or mortified that no one seemed to care.

Thinking maybe this invisibility was mostly about how I looked, I expanded the invisibility test into the virtual realm. I decided to wait three whole days without responding to my daughter's texts. This, from a mom who typically

texts her daughter multiple times a day. She eventually texted me again to ask if I could Venmo her \$500 to pay for “supplies”. WTF? When I ignored this text, she called me to ask if I was okay. Of course I was, I’m always okay. But apparently you can no longer see me.

My 1 pm meeting just got cancelled, and my calendar was miraculously empty for the rest of the day. I wanted to go home and catch up on some chores before Dave got home from work—the clutter around the house was

getting out of hand. Dave was usually patient with my messes, but I could tell he was starting to get a little annoyed. I headed to my car, fully intending to have a productive afternoon.

When I caught sight of my reliable, predictable Volvo, I felt an unexpected wave of heaviness. How had I become this person who valued dependability over adventure? Someone who would choose to go home to clean rather than enjoy the beauty of an unexpected afternoon off work. But of course, being reasonable is exactly what a Volvo driver would be. I thought back to when my dad

used to let me drive his Corvette, which was his treasured baby. I personally would have preferred a Porsche, but I didn't have that option back then. It occurs to me now that one of the unrealized benefits of being a middle-aged woman is that I DO have that option. This flash of inspiration soon revealed itself to be one of my worst ideas in a very long time.

Before I could talk myself out of it, I pulled out my phone, found the nearest car rental with an available Porsche 911, and reserved one for the next twenty-four hours. I laughed as I conjured an image of Dave nearly shitting himself when

he sees me pull up in my midlife crisis car.

Less than an hour later, I was behind the wheel of my childhood fantasy car. It felt even better than I had imagined. The rush of power when I accelerated made my Volvo feel like something my grandmother would drive. I meandered through the city, eventually finding myself on a frontage road headed for the coast. The car practically purred as I navigated the gears, building my confidence and speed with each turn.

I thought back to my uncharacteristic behavior over the past few months and came to the realization that I had been trying to recapture a previous version of myself. I had been so busy achieving, doing, building, taking charge and taking care of people, that I had allowed my adventurous side to gradually slip away. I hadn't minded, or noticed, because I was succeeding and charging through life without apology. Now, as the trees whizzed past my periphery, I could barely remember the adventures I used to crave. I had no idea what to think of who I had become.

Deep in thought, I almost missed seeing the car that sped up behind me, stopping just short of my rear bumper. It was then that the blue and red lights revealed themselves, along with the siren and animated gestures from the driver. I froze up, as I had no idea what to do if I was ever pulled over. That was never a concern in a Volvo that didn't seem able to go much above 65. I also had no idea what the speed limit was but was now painfully aware that I had exceeded it, and judging by the cop's angry expression, probably by a lot.

I'll skip the humiliating details, but let's just say that the speed limit was forty, and I was going a little north of eighty. In my defense, there was barely anyone on the road and the only reason the speed limit was that low was because there were a few scattered businesses along the road.

Fun fact: if you're going more than twice the speed limit, your car can get impounded on the spot. Lucky for me, I didn't have to go to jail, but I did need a ride back to the car rental agency. I couldn't even imagine how embarrassing it was going to be to explain my situation to the snarky Hertz desk clerk.

Far worse, though, was the call I had to make to my husband, the one that would confirm that his wife had lost her mind.

I pasted a reassuring smile on my face when I saw Dave pull up. I'm not sure why I waved like an idiot because I'm pretty sure he knew it was me standing next to the annoyed looking police officer. For once in my life, I had no idea how this would play out, but I did know that I cared what Dave thought of me far more than I was willing to admit.

Dave got out of his car and slowly walked toward me. He wore an unreadable expression that I don't think I had ever seen in all our years together.

"Well now, I was not expecting to get THAT phone call from you," Dave finally offered, with a questioning look on his face. A wave of shame washed over me, as I saw his surprise at my current predicament. I felt anything but invisible, as if something deep inside me was now exposed. Dave was looking at the woman who used to have it all together, the type of woman who most certainly would not have gotten her rental

car impounded on an afternoon that she was supposedly at work.

Dave surprised me by breaking into a wide grin, pulling me into a hug and whispering in my ear, “Is it wrong that I’m happy to see a glimpse of my favorite wild child?”

Relief washed over me as I realized that I no longer needed to hide behind my cloak of invisibility. For the first time in as long as I could remember, I felt seen. And I liked it.